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THE INGREDIENTS OF MILITARY GENIUS

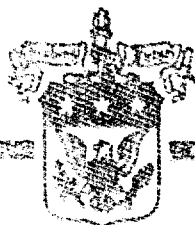
BY

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USAWC Military Studies Program Paper

THE INGREDIENTS OF MILITARY GENIUS

Individual Essay

by

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7 April 1986

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ABSTRACT

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This article deals with military genius from an historical and a classical theory perspective. The author modifies an approach developed by Carl von Clausewitz which makes use of theory as a framework for the study of history. Clausewitz used theory to study campaigns of the great captain Napoleon. This article uses Clausewitz's theory of military genius to study some of the great captains of the American Civil War and World War II. Using seven qualities of military genius that Clausewitz lists in his classic work, ON WAR, a study was made to ascertain commonalities of behavior displayed by great battlefield generals. Historical examples are given which reflect the qualities of military genius. The basic hypothesis of the article is that successful generals command their armies with their total being and not just one predominate aspect of their person. The underlying theme is that body, emotions, mind, and spirit must work in a relatively balanced manner which results in military genius being displayed. Historical example urges each senior officer to continually train and discipline his being in preparation for his possible future destiny.

THE INGREDIENTS OF MILITARY GENIUS

INTRODUCTION

Throughout history, the great captains have emerged in times of war. Where are these military geniuses in time of peace? What are they doing when there is no war? What are the qualities or ingredients of military genius? This article will focus primarily on this last question.

Providence is likely grooming, evolving and preparing the great captains of the future earth and star wars at this very moment. Like Napoleon who constantly read and studied the great captains that proceeded him or as Stonewall Jackson who read and studied Napoleon even when leading his command in war, the military geniuses of today are likely studying the great captains that have preceded them. They are hopefully studying war on their own in order to become the great captains and military geniuses of the future.

Defining Military Genius

This article deals with military genius. At the outset we must distinguish between this article's definition of military genius and contemporary notions of what genius means. They are profoundly different. A predominant theme in Webster's definition centers on the person endowed with transcendent mental superiority or more specifically, a person with a very high intelligence quotient.¹

When we think of the word genius and what it means to most modern people, we first envision a person with a high intelligence quotient (IQ) as measured by tests devised by psychologists. These psychologists



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usually have high IQ's also, possibly because they scored high on the tests they devised to measure IQ. Additionally, we apply the title of genius to one possessing what we call brilliant intellectual powers. Society can and has benefited much from such intellectual geniuses providing they have been working for the good of mankind. Yet man is not just an intellectual being. Most would accept that man is at least a being of three parts; mind, emotion and physical being. This article assumes man also to have a spiritual fourth part.

In life all four of these aspects of a man's being combine and come into play. They constantly interact with each other. In the unbalanced man, one aspect may be predominate and color all actions he takes in life. We have all seen the "egghead" who had great difficulty functioning emotionally and/or physically. Or we have all seen the outstanding athlete who vanished from notice once he left the fields of friendly strife. Life demands all aspects of a man. It is more than just his intellectual being or spiritual being that enable him to be a genius in life.

War is a common life experience in the history of man. Because of its intensity, it demands all of a man; his body, emotions, mind and spirit. War is a total human experience. Consequently, if a man desires to be successful in commanding armies, he must apply his total being, all four of his human aspects in balanced combination to become a military genius. Successful generals command and fight their corps and armies with their total being, not just one predominate aspect of their being. Military genius derives from a balance of mind, emotions, body and spirit of the great generals.

Clausewitz wrote that genius refers to a very highly developed mental aptitude for a particular occupation. For him, all the gifts of mind and temperment taken together and in combination constitute the essence of military genius. For Clausewitz military genius did not consist of a single appropriate gift--courage for example--while other qualities of mind or temperment are wanting or are not suited for war. Genius consists of a harmonious combination of elements, in which one or the other ability may dominate, but none may be in conflict with the rest.² Clausewitz does not mention the physical or spiritual aspect of man in this general definition of military genius. He does later on in his writing make strong reference to body and spirit.

In his classic work, On War, Carl von Clausewitz wrote a short yet very discerning and insightful chapter entitled, "On Military Genius."³ He defines courage, presence of mind, strength of will, ambition, strong character, grasp of topography, and statesmanship as qualities necessary for military genius. What this article attempts to do is to take Clausewitz's statements concerning these qualities of military genius and apply them to specific historical examples of successful generalship of the American Civil War and World War II. Thus historical examples will be used to illustrate Clausewitzian qualities of military genius. The error of leaping from theory to specific historical example will be made but is inescapable and accepted by the author.

In dealing with military genius this article modifies an approach developed by Carl von Clausewitz which makes use of theory as a framework for the study of history. He used theory to study campaigns of the great captain Napoleon. This article uses Clausewitz's theory of

military genius to study some of the great captains of the American Civil War and World War II.

A study of military history, of biographies, autobiographies and accounts of winning generals reveals some similarities in these winners. However, no two men are exactly alike in mind, body, emotions or spirit. It is the total person that leads armies to victory. It is not just the general's strategic thinking, his "proper" use of the techniques of operational art, or his tactical leadership that result in his success. It is the total impact of the winning general's mind, emotions, physical and spiritual being upon his soldiers, officers, superiors, peers, and the enemy that result in victory.

The central hypothesis of this article is that successful battlefield generals make use of their total genius not just their intellect to win battles and campaigns. In examining the great captains of history we may have placed too great an emphasis on brilliance of an intellectual nature and neglected the other qualities of the general's genius.

Turn of the century English officer, Colonel G. F. R. Henderson wrote of Stonewall Jackson that "he was not what is nowadays(1897) termed brilliant, but he was one of those untiring, matter-of-fact persons who would never give up an undertaking until he accomplished the object. He learned slowly, but what he got into his head he never forgot. He was not quick to decide, except when excited, and then, when he made up his mind to do a thing, he did it on short notice and in quick time."⁴ Intellectual brilliance is not the key ingredient and Clausewitz would likely agree. In fact, an overly powerful intellect

that dominates all other aspects of being might well be a detriment rather than an asset to military genius.

Field Marshall, the Viscount Slim put it this way, "Command is the projection of the commander's personality and whichever enables him best to instill his will into every part of his force is for him the better. The danger to be avoided is that generals may slavishly model their organization and even their behavior on those of some outstandingly successful commander when they are quite unlike him, in character, mental qualities and perhaps appearance. Imitations are never masterpieces."⁵ Neither Slim nor Jackson appear to have possessed brilliant minds yet they displayed what Clausewitz would define as military genius. They had strong, disciplined, knowledgeable and developed minds. They had developed their intellect in preparation for war. Both, like Patton, had spent their lifetime in the study of warfare.

Clausewitz emphasizes that military genius depends upon this general intellectual development. This requires study, thinking, pondering and development of the imagination. It is quite important to study warfare as Jackson constantly did as an instructor at Virginia Military Institute where he often stated that he was quite anxious to devote himself to study until he became a master of his profession.

But in order to continue development of the intellect of military genius, reading and study of material other than the subject matter of warfare is quite necessary and useful even when one is in the midst of a war leading an army. All during the war, Slim made it his practice to read a novel for at least one hour each day.⁶ It piqued his imagination, refreshed his intellect, heightened his spirit and often

aroused his emotions. Often solutions to the tough "unsolvable" problems of the battlefield came to him as a result. In fact, Slim gives example of such solutions. Jackson read his Bible daily. This stimulated his mind and guided his spiritual intuition. In addition, Jackson's daily routine before the war had been to study mentally without the aid of a book for one hour each day.⁷ He likely carried this discipline to war with him with great result.

Having defined military genius, an examination of each of the seven qualities of military genius that Clausewitz describes will be made. Historical examples from the lives of Generals Grant, Jackson, Rommel, Sherman, and Slim will be applied to each of these qualities. Courage will be examined first and in the greatest detail. Courage is Clausewitz's first requirement for military genius. It has both physical and moral dimensions and includes both determination and boldness.

Courage

Clausewitz, in examining military genius in more detail, relates that the first requirement for a soldier is courage in the face of personal danger and the courage to accept responsibility. Personal courage that is indifferent to danger he saw as a permanent condition and may result from an individual's constitution, habit or belief. A second type of courage springs from emotions such as patriotism, ambition or enthusiasm of any kind. Stonewall Jackson displayed both of these types of personal courage. Clausewitz believed the highest kind of courage was a combination of the two; one intellectually based and the other having its origin in the emotions. Jackson stated that his

religious belief taught him to feel as safe in battle as in bed. One can also picture Jackson at Bull Run or First Manassas riding back and forth along the front calming his untried troops with "Steady men steady, all's well" with not a trace of excitement in his voice.⁸

Clausewitz reminds us that war is the realm of physical exertion and suffering. Indifference to physical exertion and suffering requires training and discipline in order to provide us with strength of body and soul. Examples are Sherman sleeping in the open under a tent fly and Jackson in bivouac rolled in a blanket under a tree or in a fence corner during the Valley campaign. On the other hand physical weakness and sickness may take its toll. Consider Erwin Rommel, one of history's greatest fighting generals who was very sick physically in North Africa as he retreated before Montgomery. It might be hypothesized that generals whose origins were from the farm, woods or athletic field have an advantage in regard to indifference to physical suffering. These environments discipline the body and place it under submission to the emotions and the intellect. Clausewitz identifies this indifference to physical exertion and suffering as an important quality of military genius.

War is full of doubt, change, and uncertainty that test a general constantly. The military genius must, according to Clausewitz, have "first, an intellect that, even in the darkest hour, retains some glimmerings of the inner light which leads to truth; and second, the courage(to accept responsibility) to follow this faint light wherever it may lead."⁹ The first is the coup d'oeil or the inward eye. It senses and seizes the moment and can be applied to tactics, the operational level of war and to strategy. At Winchester, Stonewall

Jackson sensed that if his immediate enemy, General Banks, was to be defeated that it would likely retard the movement of his distant enemy, McClellan. He seized a strategic moment of importance in the midst of battle. He exercised his inward eye, his coup d'oeil. In Burma, Slim quickly recognized his Japanese enemy, General Sato, was making costly errors. Slim quickly stopped the Royal Air Force from bombing Sato's headquarters because Slim wanted Sato to continue to err. Sato did continue to make costly mistakes and Slim took operational advantage of his enemy. Sato's errors were only costly because Slim made them so.

Courage in the face of moral danger (courage d'esprit) is an act of temperment according to Clausewitz. The intellect may arouse the courage but the emotions bring it to action. This, Clausewitz refers to as determination to act when the motives for action are inadequate. Boldness is central to this quality of military genius. The general who would be a military genius must be bold in action in the face of the "fog and friction of war."¹⁰ Rommel, Jackson, Grant, Sherman, and Slim all displayed this quality of boldness.

Clausewitz believed that this determination proceeded from a special type of mind, a strong one rather than a brilliant one. Colonel Henderson described the power of Jackson's mind as being drilled like a strong athlete and that his self-concentration was unsurpassed. This boldness and determination is not rare in lieutenants but gets rarer as rank is achieved. The general who is a military genius has boldness as a quality. As we grow older we must continue to drill, discipline, train and strengthen our total being in order to have boldness and determination as senior leaders on the battlefield. No aspect of being is more important than the other. The body must be toughened as well as

the mind and the emotions. Often the spirit leads all three to this boldness.

The victory at Vicksburg was in Grant's mind the moment he took command at Young's Point. His boldness and determination saw victory when no one else could conceive victory. Rommel more than most had great boldness and determination even when quite ill physically and when others would have simply surrendered in North Africa. Jackson like Rommel was very dangerous even in retreat because of his boldness which made its presence felt all the way back to President Lincoln in Washington. Slim wrote that when in doubt a general must choose the bolder course of action. Sherman was even bold with his own President who appealed to him to stop commandeering civilian railroads. Sherman replied that a great campaign was impending and Lincoln acquiesced.¹¹ It would appear from history that successful battlefield generals demonstrate boldness not only to the enemy but to all men. We all admire such boldness even in peacetime.

Clausewitz believed the "inward eye" had much to do with this determination. Martin van Creveld in his most recent book, Command in War, relates this idea to what Napoleon calls "a superior understanding" to ultimately relying no less on intuitive judgment than on rational calculation.¹² It would profit us to continue to sharpen our intuitive powers along with the other parts of our being. Military genius requires this inward eye.

Intelligence alone is not courage. We often see that those we sometimes call "eggheads" are not resolute. This boldness proceeds from a special kind of mind, a strong one rather than a brilliant one. It has been hypothesized by Professor Luvaas of the U. S. Army War College

that Grant had such a mind.¹³ The same might be said of Jackson, Rommel and Slim.

Presence of Mind

Another quality of Clausewitzian military genius is presence of mind; the ability to deal with the unexpected which is the constant domain of war. Clausewitz reminds us that presence of mind and quick thinking in the face of danger need not be particularly exceptional, just adequate for the situation. Steady nerve is required if one's mind is to be available to oneself for speedy and immediate use. Rommel's presence of mind in battle is witnessed over and over in the raids and attacks of Infantry Attacks, published in 1937.¹⁴ He kept his presence of mind in the heat of many battles throughout World War II also. In the confusion of the battle of Shiloh, Grant had the presence of mind to recognize the confederates were giving way and he gathered a couple of regiments and led them forward. Jackson displayed this same quality at the battle near Kernstown where he galloped to a critical location in Garnett's faltering line and imperatively ordered him to hold his ground and then Jackson turned to restore the fight. He seized a drummer by the shoulder dragged him to a rise of ground in full view of the troops, and bade in curt, quick tones to "beat the rally."¹⁵ Kernstown ranks as an example of what determined men can do against superior numbers. Jackson's presence of mind gave those soldiers that determination and saved the day.

Strength of Will

Major Michell M. Zais, in a stimulating article on the imperatives for theater command, emphasizes the need for strength of will.¹⁶ Clausewitz would agree. If the war is going well and morale is high, little will need be exerted by the commander. It is when everything is confusing, when conditions become difficult, when physical and moral strength are almost gone and the army as a whole begins to resist going forward that the commander's will must impact and give spirit and purpose to all others. The larger the force, the greater the strength of will the general must possess. The iron will of a Rommel or Jackson have numerous witness. Slim wrote that the most important thing about a commander was his effect on morale. Slim's strength of will during his army's retreat before the Japanese held morale and enabled that army to recover and gain victory two years later.

Ambition

Clausewitz poses the question whether history has ever known a great general who was not ambitious. What famous general did not have some thirst for fame and honor? This need in generals is a powerful energizer and generals leading armies need every ounce of energy and motive power that they can muster. The range of this desire for honor, glory, and renown varies but appears to always be present in all successful battlefield generals. It must be present but must not get out of balance and overwhelm the other qualities of military genius.

Strong Character

Another quality of military genius is strong character defined by Clausewitz as one that will not be unbalanced by the most powerful emotions. A man of character is one whose views are stable and constant. This definition does not eliminate strong emotion, it just subordinates it to higher human aspects of being. Generals Jackson, Rommel, Grant, Slim, and Sherman all displayed emotion at times, some more so than others. Jackson was overly reserved emotionally while Rommel on occasion displayed extremely heavy emotion especially when angered by what he perceived as lack of effort particularly on the part of officers. However, none of these great captains permitted emotion to control the situation. They were balanced men. The emotions balanced the intellect. It may be hypothesized that the intellect dominated their emotional aspect while they let their spiritual intuition control their total being. Slim displays the ultimate stability in a general whether in the direst circumstances of defeat or the most joyous times in victory. His lifestyle, like Jackson's demonstrates a strong physical aspect controlled by a balanced emotional and intellectual being. Jackson let his spiritual sense reign over all other aspects of his being. He had the habit of connecting the seemingly most trivial and customary acts of life with silent prayer. Henderson observes that he had an almost startling consciousness of the nearness and reality of the invisible world.¹⁷ Jackson was a metaphysician in military uniform.

Grasp of Topography

Armies fight on land and he who senses the lay of the land in its relation to warfare holds in his genius one of the primary qualities of military genius. Clausewitz calls it the faculty of quickly and accurately grasping the topography of any area which enables a man to find his way. It is partly an act of the imagination. This special talent of mind fills in the gaps with judgment based on learning and experience and constructs the whole from the fragments. This use of the imagination applies to formulating a picture of the enemy from fragments as well as seeing the friendly operational situation from fragments. A good memory aids in this quality of military genius and this quality grows with increased authority. According to Clausewitz, by the time a general is commander-in-chief, he must aim at acquiring an overall knowledge of the configuration of the province, of an entire country. He must have a picture in his mind of the road and railroad networks, the mountain ranges and the river lines without losing a sense of the immediate surroundings. It should be added that the modern military genius must also picture the space above the ground well into outer space.

Liddell Hart writes of Rommel's eye for spotting what was significant in a battle scene, his eye for ground and opportunity, his sense of time and space and his ability to relate the parts to the whole to see the big picture.¹⁸ Such was Rommel's military genius in regard to topography and warfare. As Lewin's book, ROMMEL, illustrates, Rommel sketched the ground and units in his own hand to depict future battle

scenes.¹⁹ His imagination and memory were put to excellent use so that once engaged in battle all the possibilities of topography and warfare were easily at hand in his mind.

Stonewall Jackson was noted for his quickness in comprehending topographical features. He studied maps and sketches before battle but as a rule he did not refer to maps in the field but used his memory and imagination. This quality of military genius seems as if it should be a common thing. It is not.

Statesmanship

The last quality that Clausewitz ascribes to the man of military genius is the thorough grasp of national policy necessary to bring a campaign or war to successful conclusion. The commander must be a statesman at the level where strategy and policy coalesce. The military genius must be aware of the entire political situation and know how much he can achieve with the means at his disposal.

Clausewitz warns that even though the general must be a statesman, he must not cease to be a general. This is a balance that few generals are able to perform. By the same token, very few officers who see themselves as warriors can expand their vision into the realm of the statesman. In fact, very few contemporary officers even desire to be politically astute. Jackson was aware of the political situation in Richmond and Washington. He maneuvered his forces to have the maximum effect in Washington. During the height of Jackson's campaigning, men in the North asked two questions over and over, "Where is Jackson?" and "Has he taken Washington?" Jackson's grasp of the political situation was translated in his generalship on the battlefield. He knew what was

possible with the means given. He forged a strategy that had the greatest impact on the political situation.

After the fall of Fort Donelson, Grant's understanding of national policy (at least what it ought to have been), the political situation, and national strategy was probably the most profound of anyone in the Union at that time, soldier or statesman. Had he been in command of all forces at that time, he would have most assuredly followed up his belief that the Confederate southwest was open to defeat. Unfortunately history will never permit us to go back and see what might have happened if Grant had been Commander-in-Chief at that juncture. We might hypothesize that Chattanooga, Corinth, Memphis and the rest of the southwest would have fallen much earlier in the war as Grant believed.²⁰ Lincoln eventually recognized Grant's abilities. Lincoln undoubtedly perceived the statesman as well as the soldier in Grant's military genius.

CONCLUSION

In summing up his theory on military genius, Clausewitz writes that he does not wish to risk closer definition of the higher reaches of the spirit. Here he again hints of the spirit but declines to elaborate on his observations. He asserts that the human mind is far from uniform. For Clausewitz the mind that is most likely to display the qualities of military genius is inquiring rather than creative, comprehensive rather than specialized in approach and calm rather than excitable.²¹ For him, this is the kind of man we would choose to entrust the fate of our brothers and children, and the safety and honor of our country.

In conclusion, it appears that to be a military genius requires a man's total being and that a balanced interaction of body, emotions, mind and spirit are required. This demands disciplining and training all of one's being throughout life to prepare oneself for ultimate service. The qualities of courage, presence of mind, strength of will, ambition, strong character, grasp of topography and statesmanship all combine for military genius to appear on the battlefield. Historical example urges the general who would be a military genius to continually train and discipline his entire being in preparation for his possible future destiny.

Courage with its components of boldness, determination and indifference to physical exertion and suffering, stands out among the qualities of military genius that Clausewitz describes. It deserves more attention yet must not overshadow the other six qualities. Senior officers must make a conscious effort to cultivate in themselves all the physical and moral aspects of courage. Courage is the first ingredient of military genius.

Finally, the reader would gain much toward developing his own military genius by studying in detail the biographies and autobiographies of the commanders briefly mentioned in this article. Like Napoleon who studied and pondered the great captains before his time, we can help evolve our own military genius from those of great captains who preceded us.

ENDNOTES

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